



Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



Summary

Characters

Literary Devices

Quotes

Quick Quizzes

Essays

Further



Summary

Part I, Chapters V–VIII

Page 1

[Page 2](#)

Summary: Chapter V

[F : I really regard myself as an intelligent man only because throughout my
e : I've never been able to start or finish anything.

[See Important Quotations Explained](#)

The Underground Man describes his occasional bouts of repentance, tenderheartedness, and sentimentality. He feels these emotions frequently, and imagines that he is feeling them sincerely. However, he always ends up convincing himself that these moments are nothing but affectations and delusions. He explains that all of the emotional torment he has undergone in his life has been the result of boredom. In an attempt to make his life into something he could “live, at least somehow, a little,” he convinces himself that someone has offended him, or forces himself to fall in love. These ineffectual gestures toward living are the Underground Man's compensation for the inertia his consciousness imposes upon him.

The Underground Man repeats his earlier point that only narrow-minded people can be truly active, because their lack of consciousness allows them the comforting belief that there are absolute principles upon which they can base their actions. The Underground Man, in contrast, has nothing solid to support his actions, not even pure wickedness. He analyzes his actions until the idea of cause and effect dissolves. Moreover, the Underground Man also overanalyzes his rebellions against this inertia—his blind attempts at love or anger—until he hates himself for forcing false emotions, and therefore feels paralyzed and becomes more inert than ever. He feels

he is an intelligent man only because he has never been able to start or finish anything. In this regard, his inertia is a mark of his consciousness.

Summary: Chapter VI

The Underground Man describes the difference between inertia and laziness. He defines laziness as a positive quality: a lazy person can be identified positively as a “lazybones,” whereas the Underground Man is identifiable only by qualities that he lacks. The Underground Man imagines himself as a “lazybones”: he would spend all his time drinking to the health of everything “beautiful and lofty,” and would convince himself that everything, even the ugliest things in the world, were “beautiful and lofty” so that he could drink even more. He would demand respect for his opinions and die in peace, extremely fat and “positive” from all of his drinking and eating, a “positive” in a “negative age.”

Summary: Chapter VII

The Underground Man attempts to debunk the mid-nineteenth-century progressive idea that man, if he were to understand his own true interests clearly, would never do anything bad because it is most advantageous to him to behave rationally. The Underground Man, in contrast, believes that man consciously acts to his own disadvantage, simply to be obstinate. He questions the meaning of the word “advantage,” claiming that utilitarian theorists derived their list of advantages—prosperity, wealth, freedom, peace—from statistical figures and politico-economic formulas. The Underground Man suggests that there is one “strange advantage,” which he will explain later, that evades these classifications. This “strange advantage” explains why an

enlightened man may suddenly and perversely act against what appears to be his own advantage.

The Underground Man goes on to claim that the rules of logic can never predict human behavior. He mentions the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle's theory that civilization gradually softens men, making them incapable of waging war. This theory, while logically sound, is disproved by the fact that more blood has been shed in the ostensibly civilized nineteenth century than in more barbaric times.

The Underground Man predicts that man would grow bored in a society based on scientifically derived formulas for moral behavior. In the end, "ungrateful" men would welcome the chance to overturn logic and live according to their own irrational free will. The Underground Man thinks that man, under any circumstance, prefers to think he is acting as he *wants* to act, not as reason dictates. The "strange advantage" mentioned earlier is complete free will—even the choice to do something self-destructive. The most important thing to man is that his freedom of choice not be constrained by anything—even reason.

Previous section

Part I, Chapters II–IV

Next page

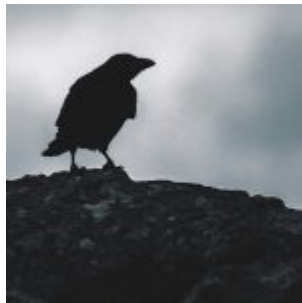
Part I, Chapters V–VIII page 2





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Character List

CHARACTERS



The Underground Man: Character Analysis

CHARACTERS



Important Quotations Explained

QUOTES

**Themes**

LITERARY DEVICES

**Review Quiz**

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